DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 351 CS 214 347

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TITLE Teaching, Reading Graduate Student Writing, and Other Waste of Time Activities.
PUB DATE Dec 93
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, December 27-30, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; *Educational Environment; English Departments; *Graduate Students; *Humanities; *Publish or Perish Issue; Research; Student Alienation; *Teaching Conditions
IDENTIFIERS *Professional Concerns

ABSTRACT

Ever since the publish-or-perish era began sometime ago, academics in the humanities have experienced a widening gap between their two primary obligations, teaching and research. Bad enough for tenure-track junior faculty, the tension between the demands of writing, delivering, and publishing papers is even worse for graduate students because of their special, tenuous position in the academy. Their academic work does not suit itself to teaching undergraduates, often because of its esoteric nature and language. Furthermore, recent budget cuts and the competitive nature of the job market have bred self-loathing, loathing of other graduate students, and alienation or solipsism. The negative consequences for both graduate education and graduate student teaching in this atmosphere of scarcity cannot be overstated. The clandestine attempt by literature graduate students to turn composition courses into the literature or theory courses they want to teach is not a solution to graduate student alienation. There are, however, several other possible solutions. The graduate student: (1) should try to see other graduate students as potentially helpful colleagues rather than contemptible versions of the worst parts of him- or herself; (2) should share his or her work with other graduate students, thereby recognizing the legitimacy of other readers besides those on the dissertation committee; and (3) should write for a general audience as a public critic, that is, a critic who writes for and about the general public. (TB)

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Paper delivered at Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association of America
Toronto, 29 Dec 1993

"Teaching, Reading Graduate Student Writing, and other Waste of Time Activities"

Ever since the publish-or-perish era began sometime before most of us got to graduate school, humanities academics have experienced a widening gap between their two primary obligations, teaching and research. Bad enough for tenure-track junior faculty, the tension between the demands of writing, delivering, and publishing papers is even worse for graduate students because of our special, tenuous position in the academy.

As apprentice teachers, graduate students have much less choice in the courses we are allowed to teach than do regular faculty hired on the basis of a specialization, who teach at least some courses in their field. Graduate students often find themselves assigned to teach in a general composition or humanities core course where they have little say over the syllabus. If they are lucky they may assist a faculty member in a large undergraduate section, but this is usually a paper-grading job that involves little actual teaching.

As students, our work does not easily lend itself to being taught to undergraduates. Even if we could teach courses in a specialization of our choosing (and sometimes we can, more or less) the work we do at the various levels of our graduate career often takes the form of exercises for us to try out academic research and writing. Seminar or term papers may be intended only for the participants or instructor of a particular graduate course. Material written for Ph.D. qualifying examinations may likewise be intended for only a very specific audience--the faculty who do the examining--or be so general as to be uninterest-

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ing. The dissertation, of course, is the most likely candidate to provide classroom material. But even if the dissertation topic is of more general interest, and its language is more accessible than most theses are in this day of theoretical super-sophistication, many graduate students do not yet feel confident that they have the expertise to put their work before the scrutiny of an audience of undergraduate students.

Another factor that makes it hard for graduate students in particular to relate our research to our teaching is our flimsy and sometimes insecure position in the academic hierarchy as half-student and half-teacher. Our authority is challenged on all sides. Our standing as academic professionals is challenged by the faculty who evaluate us. Our authority as teachers is challenged by the students who feel that being taught by just a T.A. is not getting their money's worth at college. And, our existential worth is challenged by people outside the academy--family especially--who ask us what our "major" is, and wonder why we are still in school since whats-his-name from high school got through law or business school in two or three years. Since neither the real nor the academic world is going to affirm their professional identies, a sullen retreat into alienation and solipsism looks more and more inevitable to many graduate students.

Recent budget cuts in the academic humanities only increase alienation. Within graduate departments, reduced funding leads to bitter competition for the scraps of fellowship, grant, and teaching support left after cutbacks. If, to paraphrase erstwhile professor Henry Kissinger, academic politics are so petty because the stakes are so small, then graduate student politics must be the pettiest of all. And the abysmal job market in the humanities is a sword of Damacles hanging over our whole graduate school careers. It provides a dystopian horizon of the herculean effort we will have to expend to burnish our resumes just to land even the least attractive one-year replacement position. This atmosphere of scarcity encourages two kinds of ill-will that poison graduate education. That our labor is so little valued leads to self-loathing, where we wonder why we do not deserve

basic respect and job security. And self-loathing leads naturally into a loathing of others like ourselves, namely other graduate students. After all, our graduate student colleagues made the same bad career choice that we did, and they do the same apparently worthless work that we do. In addition, other graudate students are our primary competition for departmental honors and financial support, and eventually, they will be our competitors on the super-tight job market.

The negative consequences for both graduate education and graduate student teaching of the communal ill-will and desperate competitiveness caused by this atmosphere of scarcity cannot be overstated. The main consequence seems to be a cynicism about power relations in the academy and alienation from faculty, other graduate students, and our own undergraduate students, who are all in league, it appears, to challenge and embarass us. The extreme version of this alienation can lead to either retreat into hobbies on the one hand, or angst-ridden agoraphobia on the other, neither state conducive to either good research or good teaching. Alienated graduate students write and teach as if in a vacuum. They miss both the productive feedback necessary for clear and interesting writing that speaks to its reader as an audience, and the opportunity to share pedagogical experiences and techniques necessary to progress through teaching apprenticeship.

There are many solutions for graduate student alienation, and most of them seem to involve the integration of research and teaching. Some of these solutions do not work well in my experience. One of these entails the clandestine attempt by literature graduate students to turn composition courses into the literature or theory courses they always wanted to teach. Understandably, undergraduates can feel hoodwinked when they discover, too late, that the course they signed up for called "introductory expository writing" turns out to be "a selection of my favorite short stories on the question of the body" or "ideological reprogramming for racist-sexist-homophobic college students."

Another way to integrate graduate student research and teaching that fails because it alienates students, and thus encourages cynicism on the part of graduate student

teachers, is to bring in small bits of highly specialized graduate seminar or dissertation work into the classroom. I have seen many students falter fruitlessly over nearly incomprehensible essays from such pet theorists of graduate programs as Helene Cixous and Michel Foucault. Often graduate student teachers deal with this difficulty in a way that is not productive but insulting and discouraging. To tell undergraduates that it is good that they do not understand readings from critical theory, because such "subversive" texts are not meant to be understood in a phallo- or logocentric system of rationality, does a disservice to both the students and the theory. In addition, it is discouraging for both teacher and students. Graduate students who introduce complex critical theory into the classroom conclude that today's college students are simply too stupid to engage in truly critical thinking. Undergraduate students exposed to theory out of context get the understandable impression that graduate study in the humanities is a kind of silly game for an in-group of pseudo-sophisticates, or, to paraphrase Gerald Graff, it is insider trading in which they have nothing invested.

Why not just embrace alienation as a positive value? Why not be as competitive and backstabbing as it takes to get out of graduate school as soon as possible and get into real job where you will get some respect? Maybe this does work for a few Machiavellians, but do the rest of us really want to pay the emotional price of such cynicism?

More promising ways for graduate students to successfully integrate their research and their teaching, and fight alienation at the same time, rely on establishing community with the very groups who seem to challenge us. Even the most alienated graduate students recognize that close relations with faculty are always advisable for political if not intellectual reasons. What I wish to emphasize here are the benefits of closer relations with three other groups, often-neglected by graduate students: our graduate student colleagues, our undergraduate students, and, the world outside of the academy. I have several specific proposals for accomplishing this that may also have beneficial affects on graduate student teaching.

The first involves trying to see other graduate students not as contemptible versions of the worst parts of ourselves, or as competitors who must be avoided or even crushed if possible, but as potentially helpful colleagues. Basically, love thy neighbor--were it not for graduate school alienation this, of course, would be an obvious point. In my experience, the most promising way to get mileage out of other other graduate students is to engage them in collaborative projects: teaching clusters, reading groups, works-in-progress and dissertation groups, and so on. I am aware of the common complaint: "I just don't have time to read the work of other graduate students," and I realize that graduate students should not be faulted for preferring a beating from the Los Angeles police department to hearing another rambling seminar oral report or reading someone else's sloppy and jargony dissertation chapter. This especially when I could be in front of my computer obsessing over my own sloppy and jargony dissertation.

Yet, graduate students pursuing their individual careers on the assumption that each of them is the only interesting scholar in their graduate program is not the answer. We must challenge the assumption that only faculty or recognized published scholars and critics have anything interesting to say. To really change attitudes on this score, perhaps we should consider changes in our own research and writing, and in the way we approach others' writing. If we take seriously the precept of composition teaching that research and writing are a process rather than a product, then we will read peers' work for its potential rather than in comparison with the polished essays of the most impressive scholars. This may involve more "skimming" and less "close reading" in order to place a piece of writing in the necessary context for revision, the goal of writing a clear, focused analysis that proceeds from an arguable thesis.

To form more of a community with our undergraduate students, we need to see teaching as an integral part of our graduate careers. We can bring methodologies into the classroom while maintaining the integrity of the subject matter. We can integrate our

research with actual or potential classroom teaching by imagining seminar papers, exam writings, or dissertation chapters as classes to be presented to undergraduates. And, we can make the best of academic critical theory clear and usable to students in a particular class, and point the way towards its relevance after the final paper or exam.

Finally, in our research and teaching we should think of a larger context outside of the university for why what we do really matters. I subscribe to Gerald Graff's notion that the purpose of academic literary study is to popularize culture. And, for learning to write well, critics like Graff, Edward Said, Frederick Crews, Camille Paglia, or just about any academic critic who writes occasionally for a non-academic audience (in publications such as The New York Review of Books, Harpers, or The Nation) provide better models for graduate students than do most post-structuralist jargonmeisters. To prepare ourselves to be not merely academic but public critics, we can start by simplifying our work: even if we cannot actually fit current writing into whatever class we happen to be teaching, we can imagine it as a potential presentation to a general reader.

A less "academic" and more journalistic style and a conscious relating of academic literary concerns to real-world issues would be essential here. For example, the fiction of a non-academic reader with no understanding of jargon can improve the readibility of prose, making it both more interesting for peers and more publishible as well. In an age when fewer and fewer North Americans actually read books, it seems to me that we should work on making the books we value more, not less, accessible to a non-academic audience. And isn't this, after all, the goal of good teaching as well as good writing?